

Service Date: February 14, 1997

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SERVICE REGULATION
BEFORE THE PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION
OF THE STATE OF MONTANA

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IN THE MATTER OF the Application)	UTILITY DIVISION
of Citizens Telecommunications Company)	
Pursuant to Section 252(e) of the)	DOCKET NO. D96.11.191
Telecommunications Act of 1996 for)	
Approval of its Resale Agreement With)	ORDER NO. 5962a
U S WEST Communications, Inc.)	

AND

IN THE MATTER OF the Application)	
of Montana Communications)	
Pursuant to Section 252(e) of the)	UTILITY DIVISION
Telecommunications Act of 1996 for)	
Approval of its Resale Agreement With)	DOCKET NO. D96.11.198
U S WEST Communications, Inc.)	

FINAL ORDER

Introduction and Procedural Background

1. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 (1996 Act)¹ sets out methods by which local competition may be encouraged in local exchange markets which historically have been monopolistic. One of the paths to a competitive local exchange market set forth in the 1996 Act is resale of services. *See* 47 U.S.C. §§ 251(b)(1) and (c)(4). Parties can voluntarily negotiate agreements for resale or they may request state commissions to mediate or arbitrate unresolved issues. 47 U.S.C. § 252. Once agreement is reached voluntarily or by arbitrating, the parties to the agreement must submit it to the appropriate state commission for approval. 47 U.S.C. § 252(e).

¹ Telecommunications Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-104, 110 Stat. 56 (to be codified as amended in scattered sections of 47 U.S.C.).

2. On November 8, 1996 U S WEST Communications, Inc. (U S WEST) entered into separate interconnection agreements with Citizens Telecommunications Company (Citizens) and Montana Communications (MC). U S WEST and Citizens filed their "Agreement for Service Resale" (Citizens agreement) with the Montana Public Service Commission (Commission) on November 18, 1997. This agreement provides for Citizens to resell U S WEST's local exchange services in Montana and several other states. A similar "Agreement for Service Resale" negotiated between U S WEST and MC (MC agreement) was submitted to the Commission by MC on November 21, 1997 and initially docketed as D.96.11.198. The Commission consolidated the MC agreement with the Citizens agreement in D96.11.191 at a work session held on December 3, 1996.

3. The Commission's Procedural Order issued on December 6, 1996, establishing the procedures to be followed in this proceeding and, *inter alia*, setting parameters for intervenors to follow and permitting intervention by interested parties until December 11, 1997. Intervention was granted to AT&T Communications of the Mountain States, Inc. (AT&T), the Montana Telephone Association, and the Montana Consumer Counsel. AT&T filed comments urging the Commission to conclude that the MC and Citizens agreements have no precedential effect on the Commission's consideration of future arbitrated interconnection and resale agreements between incumbent local exchange carriers (LECs) and competitive local exchange carriers (CLECs).

4. Because no prefiled testimony was filed and no data requests were issued according to the procedural schedule, and the substantive filings consisted of nothing more than the agreements of the parties, the Commission vacated the hearing on January 14, 1997, pursuant to the parties' requests, agreeing to consider the matter on submitted briefs. Briefs were filed by U S WEST and Citizens only, urging approval of the agreements as negotiated.

5. The parties' agreements include a clause which does not permit either party to transfer a customer between them when the customer has an account in arrears. The Commission requested additional information from the parties addressing its concerns about this contract

clause by January 31, 1997. At a work session held on February 3, 1997 the Commission voted to reject the clause and approve the remainder of the agreements.

Applicable Law and Commission Decision

6. The standards for approving an interconnection agreement differ, depending on whether the agreement has been voluntarily negotiated or has been arbitrated by a state commission. 47 U.S.C. § 252(e)(2). Both agreements submitted for approval in this proceeding were negotiated voluntarily by the parties and thus must be reviewed according to the provisions in 47 U.S.C. § 252(e)(2)(A).

7. Section 252(e)(4) of the 1996 Act provides that a negotiated agreement submitted for a state commission's approval must be approved or rejected within 90 days or it will be deemed approved. Thus, Commission approval or rejection according to the substantive standards set forth in the 1996 Act must issue by February 16, 1997, 90 days following the submission of the Citizens agreement for Commission approval.²

8. The Commission must approve or reject the agreement, with written findings as to any deficiencies. 47 U.S.C. § 252(e)(1). Section 252(e)(2)(A) prescribes the grounds for rejection of an agreement reached by voluntary negotiation:

(2) GROUNDS FOR REJECTION.--The State commission may only reject--

(A) an agreement (or any portion thereof) adopted by negotiation under [47 U.S.C. § 252(a)] if it finds that

(i) the agreement (or portion thereof) discriminates against a telecommunications carrier not a party to the agreement; or

(ii) the implementation of such agreement or portion is not consistent with the public interest, convenience, and necessity;

²Technically, the date for approval of the MC agreement is February 19, 1997.

9. Notwithstanding the limited grounds for rejection in 47 U.S.C. § 252(e)(2)(A), the state commission's authority is preserved in § 252 (e)(3) to establish or enforce other requirements of state law in its review of arbitrated or negotiated agreements, including requiring compliance with state telecommunications service quality standards or requirements. Such compliance is subject to § 253 of the 1996 Act which does not permit states to permit or impose any statutes, regulations, or legal requirements that prohibit or have the effect of prohibiting market entry.

10. None of the intervenors have expressed any reservations about the parties' agreements not complying with federal law as cited above or with state telecommunications requirements. The comments filed by AT&T do not contend that the agreements discriminate against a telecommunications provider not a party to the agreement, as would be expected from a telecommunications provider intending to enter the Montana local exchange market if it believed the agreements to be discriminatory. The Montana Consumer Counsel, which represents the consumers of the State of Montana, has not pointed to any portions of the agreement that he believes is not consistent with the public interest, convenience and necessity.

11. Nonetheless, following an initial review of the agreement, the Commission expressed concern and asked for input from the parties regarding the following contract clause included in both agreements at page 7:

The Parties agree that they will not transfer their respective end user customers whose accounts are in arrears between each other. The Parties further agree that they work cooperatively together to develop the standards and processes applicable to the transfer of such accounts.

Section IV.C.2. The Commission requested that the parties respond to its concern that this clause is not consistent with the public interest, convenience and necessity as required by 47 U.S.C. § 252(e)(2)(A)(ii). The Commission indicated its concern that the customer's ability to change local exchange providers may be improperly and unreasonably restricted by this contract term, noting that there is no explanation of what is meant by "in arrears," there may be impermissible

privacy violations resulting from this term, and that it might be an anticompetitive or an unfair trade practice.

12. Citizens and U S WEST filed a joint response to the Commission's request, stating their belief that the language is a necessary part of their agreement, attempting to address potential problems with unscrupulous customers who switch providers to avoid having to pay the existing provider's bill. They further stated:

Once a customer switches providers, it will be very difficult for the old provider to collect the unpaid bill. Additionally, a customer leaving behind an unpaid bill is a very high risk customer for the new provider. The parties have not yet been able to design an optimal system which will prevent abuses by the customer while minimizing the amount of actual credit information that is exchanged. That is why the second sentence of the language . . . requires the parties to continue working together to develop standards and processes applicable to the transfer of such accounts.

As a reasonable interim measure, the parties agree that the current provider will not transfer a customer if that customer is in arrears. For example, if USWC refuses to transfer a customer to CTC, CTC will know that the customer needs to resolve a bill in arrears, without knowing any of the details of the customer's credit history.

In the case of both USWC and CTC, arrears means the customer is in the late stages of a progressive effort to collect on a bad debt.

U S WEST and Citizens contend that the provision promotes the public interest by enabling carriers some means to protect their ability to collect bad debt, thereby preserving the financial health of the parties and keeping rates low for all subscribers by reducing the cost of unpaid debt which ultimately would have to be absorbed by them. They state that it also provides a means to discourage bad faith actions of customers who switch carriers to avoid payment.

13. MC owner, David Wick, also responded to the Commission's request, stating that the transfer of information relating to customers whose accounts are in arrears is a positive approach to addressing fraud in the competitive market. Mr. Wick stated that, "This is not for the exclusion of any individual requesting service, but rather to help in determining deposit amounts and duration of holding deposits." Mr. Wick echoed some of the same concerns as U S WEST and Citizens, noting that there is a higher potential for the consumer to abuse the system

in the competitive environment. Although this relates to only a small percent of the consumer base, according to Mr. Wick, resale margins are so small to start with and the exchange of basic information is only a means for managing potential losses.

14. The Commission is sympathetic to the concerns expressed by the parties and recognizes that the competitive local exchange market will likely create opportunities for customers to obtain services from alternate providers even though they may have delinquent accounts with a competitor. This will be a change for the incumbent LEC which has been the only provider of telecommunications service in the past and which still has near total market power, particularly in rural states like Montana. Its credit records will not be complete and it may have to develop new methods to screen new customers. Still, the incumbent LEC will have the benefit of its database records in the case of a reseller to show that service has been recently disconnected at a particular address and this may assist it somewhat in preventing unscrupulous actions by consumers. In the short term, its existing credit records should be reliable and useful for this purpose.

15. In Montana, regulated telecommunications providers such as U S WEST must provide service to all customers if they meet certain conditions set forth in Commission regulations. In certain instances, U S WEST may request and obtain advance payments, deposits, or other credit guarantees. Resellers are not subject to these credit regulations and they may take steps they deem necessary to prevent uncollectible accounts. As an example, resellers may rely on consumer credit reporting agencies, while the regulated incumbent may not use such reports for serving its residential customers.

16. The Commission expressed its concern for consumer privacy. Sharing credit information without the knowledge and consent of the customer involved violates the customer's reasonable expectations of privacy and should not be permitted unless there is a compelling reason for such an invasion. The parties have not demonstrated that such a compelling reason exists and that other means of limiting potential losses are unreasonable, or that they may be substantially harmed if they are not permitted to exchange consumer information between them. The Commission further notes that telecommunications providers in the long distance segment of

the industry have not been able to engage in the sort of exchange of information which may be permissible under the above-quoted provision. The privacy rights of consumers and their ability to choose a supplier of telecommunications services may not be trumped by the parties' concerns for uncollectible accounts.

17. The proposed term would also increase the opportunity for engaging in anticompetitive activity. Specifically, an account that is "in arrears" may be a valued customer who routinely pays bills a little late and has been permitted to do so by the provider. Although the parties stated in their response that this means that a customer is in the last states of a progressive effort to collect on a bad debt, that is not what it says, and in interpreting contract terms, the plain meaning of words used generally prevails. Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1988) defines arrears as "the state of being behind in the discharge of obligations." The Commission finds this term vague and overbroad, with the potential of unreasonably restricting consumer choice as the competitive market develops. Thus, it is not in the public interest.

18. A further concern is the incumbent LEC's obligation as a carrier of last resort. The incumbent LEC may be required to provide service according to the Commission's regulations, notwithstanding the existence of an account in arrears with another carrier. *See* ARM 38.5.1101, *et seq.* Section 252(e)(3) of the 1996 Act clearly permits the Commission to require regulated incumbents to provide service to residential consumers, notwithstanding other credit problems the consumer may have. *See* ARM 38.5.1104.

19. The Commission finds that the remainder of the terms in the parties' agreements appear to conform to the standards required by the Act. There have been no objections raised that the agreements otherwise discriminate improperly or are not consistent with the public interest, convenience and necessity. According to § 252(e)(2)(A)(ii) of the 1996 Act, the Commission may reject an agreement or a portion of an agreement if it is not consistent with the public interest. Although the clause discussed above is found to be inconsistent with the public interest, and is therefore rejected, the entire agreement need not be rejected. Rejection of the entire agreement is not appropriate when the objectionable term has no direct effect on the

remainder of the agreement. The remainder of the MC and Citizens agreements should be approved.

20. The Commission finds it inappropriate to grant AT&T's request that it address the precedential effect of this ruling on future arbitrated interconnection and resale agreements. Such a ruling is better left to a proceeding where such a determination is necessary and after fully developing the issue. It has no bearing on the parties to these agreements and the Commission is not herein required to interpret the effect of its order on other persons, except to determine whether the negotiated agreements may discriminate against other carriers who are not parties to the agreement.

Conclusions of Law

1. The Commission has authority to supervise, regulate and control public utilities. Section 69-3-102, MCA. U S WEST and Citizens are public utilities offering regulated telecommunications services in the State of Montana. Section 69-3-101, MCA.

2. The Commission has authority to do all things necessary and convenient in the exercise of the powers granted to it by the Montana Legislature and to regulate the mode and manner of all investigations and hearings of public utilities and other parties before it. Section 69-3-103, MCA.

3. Montana Communications and Citizens intend to resell telecommunications services in U S WEST territories throughout Montana. Resellers are not regulated by the Commission. Section 69-3-804, MCA.

4. The United States Congress enacted the Telecommunications Act of 1996 to encourage competition in the telecommunications industry. Congress gave responsibility for much of the implementation of the 1996 Act to the states, to be handled by the state agency with regulatory control over telecommunications carriers. *See generally*, the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-104, 110 Stat. 56 (amending scattered sections of the Communications Act of 1934, 47 U.S.C. §§ 151, *et seq.*). The Montana Public Service Commission is the state agency charged with regulating telecommunications carriers in Montana and properly exercises jurisdiction in this Docket pursuant to Title 69, Chapter 3, MCA.

5. Adequate public notice and an opportunity to be heard has been provided to all interested parties in this Docket, as required by the Montana Administrative Procedure Act, Title 2, Chapter 4, MCA.

6. The Commission has jurisdiction to approve the resale agreements negotiated by the parties and submitted to the Commission for approval according to § 252(e)(2)(A). Section 69-3-103, MCA.

7. Approval of interconnection agreements by the Commission is subject to the requirements of federal law as set forth in 47 U.S.C. § 252. Section 252(e) limits the Commission's review of a negotiated agreement to the standards set forth therein for rejection of such agreements. Section 252(e)(4) requires the Commission to approve or reject the Citizens agreement and the MC Agreement by February 16, 1997, and February 19, 1997, respectively, or they will be deemed approved.

8. The Commission may reject a portion of a negotiated agreement and approve the remainder of the agreement if such action is consistent with the public interest, convenience and necessity and does not discriminate against a carrier not a party to the agreement. 47 U.S.C. § 252(e)(2)(A).

Order

THEREFORE, based upon the foregoing, it is ORDERED

1. that the resale agreements of the parties, submitted to this Commission for approval pursuant to the 1996 Act, include a contract term which is not consistent with the public interest and which is rejected as explained above; and

2. with the exclusion of the rejected contract term, the resale agreements are approved.

DONE AND DATED this 10th day of February, 1997, by a vote of 5-0.

BY ORDER OF THE MONTANA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

DAVE FISHER, Chairman

NANCY MCCAFFREE, Vice Chair

BOB ANDERSON, Commissioner

DANNY OBERG, Commissioner

BOB ROWE, Commissioner

ATTEST:

Kathlene M. Anderson
Commission Secretary

(SEAL)

NOTE: Any interested party may request the Commission to reconsider this decision. A motion to reconsider must be filed within ten (10) days. See ARM 38.2.4806.